...so unless the candy bar calls the lollipop a sucker, next I'll tell you about Uncle Wiggily and
CLAY GEERDES'
COMIX WAVE™
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UNCLE WIGGILY

Howard Roger Garis was not into folklore like Joel Chandler Harris, nor was he a naturalist like Beatrix Potter and Thornton Burgess. He worked for the NEWARK NEWS for many years, moonlighting for Ed Stratemeyer's syndicate, and turning out books about Tom Swift, Baseball Joe, and lesser lights like the Curlytops. Born in 18~3, Garis was fast, a man born with the gift of gab, the kind of guy who would loan you the shirt off his back and tell his wife, Lily, some outlandish story about his shirtlessness. The Garises were a writing family. They wrote series books and magazine stories and anything else that came their way. They were entertainers, and Howard could tell a good story in print or onstage or at the dinner table, some of them true, most not. Rejected by a girl friend, he wrote his first novel in the baggage room of the Lackawanna Railroad where he was employed at the time. It was called A WORLD WITHOUT WOMEN. It ran to 400 pages and wound up in the waste basket of some editor at HARPER'S. Garis told the man to put it there if it lacked merit, so he did. Maybe Philip Wylie found it and turned it into his classic, THE DISAPPEARANCE. Who knows? A story about all the men disappearing for the women and all the women disappearing for the men with each having to learn to do the other's tasks would have appealed to any pulp writer of the time. Garis was 16. His Dad tried his best to keep him out of the writing trade, but Howard was addicted. He was sent to engineering school, but the only thing he ever did with that education was use the drafting skill to turn out an Uncle Wiggily board game; of course, that was enough, since the game sold better than any other kid's game for nearly 50 years. Garis married young, a woman who worked on the Newark paper, a fellow-writer, one who would compete with him all her life. Not that that wrecked their relationship; not a bit of it; just made it more interesting. Theirs was a house where something was wrong if you didn't hear the click of typewriter keys most of the time. Howard used two fingers. His wife, Lilian MacNamara Garis (called Lillie Mack or Lilian Garis on some of her books) wrote in longhand and used a hired typist. It is very unlikely that you have missed reading something by one or more of the Garises if you grew up in America. Lily worked on the Bobbsey Twins, Garis on Tom Swift, and all of them on more of Stratemeyer's titles that I could possibly list here.

Asked to do a children's story for the paper, Howard came up with UNCLE WIGGILY. Now I don't buy that story his son, Roger, tells in MY FATHER WAS UNCLE WIGGILY (196~), because I know Garis grew up reading Uncle Remus stories and his menagerie bears too much a resemblance to that of Harris to be coincidental. Roger says his Dad sat down in the woods and a rabbit came along and wiggled his ears at him and Howard just decided then and there that he would do some stories about that rabbit and name him Uncle Wiggily Longears. However the idea came to him, Howard started doing the Uncle Wiggily stories in the BEDTIME STORIES part of the Newark News on January 30, 1910. That date is important, because it shows that Garis started doing his stories before they were imitated by Thornton Waldo Burgess (who did his first newspaper stories in the FALL of 1910 (admitting in his autobiography that he had seen the Uncle Wiggilys, but not mentioning the character's name). Garis wrote the stories all his life, knocking out as many as 8 in an hour. His son gives him credit for over 15,000 stories. For many years, Uncle Wiggily and Burgess' Peter Rabbit (as illustrated by Harrison Cady) were the most popular characters in America. Those who grew up on Wiggily had no trouble making the transition to Bugs Bunny when that character showed up at the end of the thirties. Had Garis lived in Hollywood instead of New Jersey, it's likely Uncle Wiggily would have become a cartoon star, but perhaps the old gentleman rabbit was too cool. Even Brer Rabbit had to be jazzed up when he became a movie star in SONG OF THE SOUTH in 1946.

Howard R. Garis became famous with his rabbit and he was asked to lecture and to read the stories on the radio, all of which he did. Not a shy bone in his body. Garis's public life would have terrified folks like Bea Potter and Joe Harris. Garis' new celebrityhood just bugged Lily Garis no end. Here he was getting all that attention for some rabbit stories in the newspapers and it was like she was suddenly a nobody. After all, Lily had written over a hundred children's books at this time and was still as productive, if not as fast, as Howard. The rabbit caused a lot of competition in the family. Roger tells a story about his Dad coming home from one of his Uncle Wiggily reading tours. Lily had a new book out and she had it on the table in the living room. Well, Howard glanced at it and asked what was for supper. When you write a book every two or three days and have hundreds of them to your credit, another Bobbsey Twins isn't going to stimulate much interest, certainly not as much as a potential plate of fried chicken. That wasn't the point, of course, and Lily stormed upstairs. She was hurt by her husband's fame and she wanted more praise for her own work, but it was not to come. Uncle Wiggily has survived, still in print today, the books still collected, while nothing of Lilian Garis has been in print for many years.

Howard Garis never stopped. He outlived Lily by many years, lived with his son and his grandchildren, wrote his Uncle Wiggily stories, was well known and liked in his community, and died at the age of 89 in 1966. His son said that Howard never worried, that he was a man who went through life certain that everything would be all right, that things would go well for him, and they did.

Garis accepted his fate. He tried to get into the adult market, but books for grown-ups were not his speed. He did THROUGH SPACE TO MARS long before Burroughs' John Carter stuff (1911), and when I noticed he had written "Professor Jonkin's Cannibal Plant" for ARGOSY in 1905, I couldn't help thinking of the current plant star in the musical version of THE LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS. In spite of his output and his popularity, Garis is virtually ignored in most books about comics. UNCLE WIGGILY was in numerous FOUR COLOR COMICS in the forties, right along with Bugs Bunny, but I think Bugs got the edge by being a movie hero. The characters who were animated tended to last, and that's particularly true now that video cassettes are here. Uncle Wiggily was folksy and rural, a lot closer to Brer Rabbit than to the more urban and sophisticated Bugs. It's easy to imagine Bugs doing just about anything, while it would be hard to imagine old Uncle Wiggily punking out in a rock club.

I think Howard Garis deserves his place in the history of popular culture and those who leave him out of their histories and encyclopedias are, to my way of thinking, not fulfilling their tasks as accurate historians.

--CLAY GEERDES

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EDWARD STRATEMEYER: WHO HE?

Even if you are over the age of eighteen, the chances are pretty slim that you've ever heard of Edward Stratemeyer, but they're even slimmer that you haven't had your reading habit influenced by his books. Born in 1862 to a pair of German immigrant parents in Elizabeth, New Jersey, Ed Stratemeyer was destined to invade the American psyche to a degree surpassed only by writers like L. Frank Baum and Lewis Carroll. A fan of Horatio Alger and Oliver Optic, Ed dropped out of school at the end of the eighth grade. Determined to be a writer, he served his apprenticeship at Street and Smith, pulp city, working on such notable characters as Nick Carter. Not one to work for anyone else for too long, Ed struck out on his own, and with his Rover Boys series in 1899, he started to move into the big time. In this pre-radio and t-v world, people read a lot of newspapers and pulp magazines and series books. If you were trying to make a living at pop writing during this turn of the century period, it's more than likely you wrote your share of pulp and series material. Most of it had someone else's name on it, though you could strike out and put your own name on a book here and there if you wanted to publish it on your own hook. That was a gamble. If you played ball with the Stratemeyer Syndicate, you got anywhere from $125 to $200 for a series book which would have a house name like Arthur M. Winfield, Laura Lee Hope, or Alice B. Emerson on it. Some call it ghosting, but it wasn't, really, not in the sense that current writers who write fake bios for celebrities to put their names on are "ghosts," because you could submit an outline of an idea to Ed and he might say for you to go with it and tailor it for Tom Swift or Ruth Fielding or another top star. Ed was a master at dreaming up series hits. His titles sold in the millions and they still do, though the syndicate is now owned by Simon and Schuster (since 1984).

Stratemeyer used the shotgun approach in his books, putting one out on several popular themes and waiting to see which one hit and which didn't. You're all familiar with his best-known hits, the Hardy Boys (1926) and Nancy Drew (1930), so we'll focus here on some of the books you may not know as well,like the RUTH FIELDING series. Though not Stratemeyer's first series aimed at girls, RUTH FIELDING was the most successful. An independent character who rose from orphanhood to become a world traveler and movie director, Ruth would be right at home at a feminist meeting. Neither window-dressing or some male hero's flunky, Ruth controlled her life, making her own way to fame and fortune. No second-class citizen here. Ruth starred in 30 titles from 1913-34. She is described in RUTH FIELDING AND THE GYPSIES (1915): "She was plump, but not too plump; and she was quick in her movements, while her lithe and graceful figure showed that she possessed not only health, but great vitality. Her hair was of a beautiful bright brown color, was thick, and curled just a little." Like her predecessor, Dorothy Dale (1908, Ed's first girl heroine), Ruth ran the show. In this one, she is kidnapped by Queen Zelaya and her gypsy band, has a number of adventures with the appropriate near-drownings and other disasters, and finally escapes and receives the reward money. What wrecked the Fielding series was marriage. Her readers didn't want a married Ruth cooking and cleaning for a man; they wanted her out there doing her own stunts on the set, deciding and determining her own fate. Teenaged girls read the Fieldings and they are not married and can't really identify with a heroine who is. They like that option out there in the future, should they choose it one day for themselves, but when it is already made by the writers, the fantasy is gone for them. There were ~ books after Ruth's marriage, but they sold poorly and the syndicate learned a lesson. You can't let your characters age and you have to keep them close to home if you want to continue them in limited adventures; if they travel too far, they become too sophisticated, and they can't come back to Bayport and be the regular guys anymore.

Ed Stratemeyer would dream up a series, write several of the books himself, then farm out the writing, usually to newspaper writers who needed to pad their income, folks like Howard R. Garis, who struck his own pay dirt with Uncle Wiggily in 1910, and Lilian McNamara Garis. Lilian wrote many of the Bobbsey Twins for Stratemeyer, while her husband was cranking out Curlytops and Bunny Browns. The Garises were a writing family and I intend to feature them on a future CW. Ed was like a master editor. He had the ideas and he would outline plots, assign them to writers, get the texts back, edit them to suit himself, and pack the book off to one of his various publishers (like Cupples and Leon). Ed, not the writers, owned all the characters and copyrights. Now $125 might sound like chicken feed for a book, but remember $125 was a lot of money in 1915 when a quart of milk sold for 6¢ and you might pay $8-15 a month for the two storey house you lived in, so the writers did all right. The stories were about 120 double-spaced typewritten pages, so it was roughtly a buck a page. Most of the pulp mags paid a penny or more a word. This system developed some of the fastest writers extant. Stratemeyer was credited with 200 books under his own names and the editorship of more than a thousand more. Frederick Faust (who wrote under the names, Max Brand and Evan Evans and some 27 other pseudonyms) wrote more than 500 books in his lifetime, and most of them, as you should know, are still quite readable today. Stratemeyer was said to have written books in two days or less. His daughter, Harriet Stratemeyer Adams, told Carol Billman in THE SECRET OF THE STRATEMEYER SYNDICATE (1986) that she typically finished a mystery in two months. This would have been a Nancy Drew under the pen-name of Carolyn Keene. Harriet, along with her sister, Edna, took over running the syndicate in 1930 when Ed died.

Ed began one of his series with three titles; if these hit a readership, more followed. House names were used, not because Stratemeyer advocated author anonymity, rather because they were expedient in the nature of series books. If a title took off and the writer died, what then? With a pseudonym like Franklin W. Dixon, the Hardy Boys are immortal. Writers come and go, but Frank Dixon stays on. This practice was continued in comic books, which owe more than a little of their existence to the preceding series books. Jack Kirby's Newsboy Legion and subsequent Boy Commandoes were right out of the Rover Boys and Horatio Alger; just as Lois Lane was Nancy Drew via Ruth Fielding. Why, L. Frank Baum had a boy flying around having adventures in THE MASTER KEY (1902), long before SUPERMAN took to the air.

What Stratemeyer did in the Hardy Boys was to meld the earlier adventure story (TREASURE ISLAND) with the detective story and I don't know about you, but it worked for me. The Hardys my mother bought for me when I was 12 or 13 developed a reading interest that was to remain with me all my life. Without Stratemeyer, Garis, Faust, and the other series/pulp writers, how many of us would have gotten to Dostoyevsky, Hemingway, Faulkner, and T. S. Eliot?